



Gesa Ingendahl. *Witwen in der Frühen Neuzeit: Eine kulturhistorische Studie.* Geschichte und Geschlechter. Frankfurt am Main: Campus Verlag, 2006. 380 pp. EUR 39.90, paper, ISBN 978-3-593-38171-8.



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Commissioned by Susan R. Boettcher

To begin with, let me admit to a minor irritation about the title. This is not a study of "widows in early modern times," but an in-depth study of the situation of German widows in the free imperial city of Ravensburg, primarily in the eighteenth century. One can applaud that the author chose to investigate the positions of widows in one urban location thoroughly rather than in many superficially, but as a content indicator, the title is misleading and pretentious. The work would have been more accurately described had the author maintained the original, albeit more cumbersome, title of her dissertation.

That said, the book does offer a thorough discussion of the status of widows in Ravensburg, based on original source material. After a twofold introduction that defines widows and gives a history of widows as a subject of research, chapter 1, "Widows as a Historical Presence," shows where information on widows in the eighteenth century can be found, namely in documents concerning real estate and census records, marriage records, artisan ordinances, and in preserved letters and

petitions. Ingendahl makes the most of these documents, and in her discussion these records come to life to reveal a picture in which the traditional view of women and widows guides and influences the recording, but also shows how city officials were forced to deal with the reality of a single-again woman with a certain position, possibly possessions, usually children, and with varying needs.

Chapter 2 deals with widows as they appear in tax and census records. It describes widows in a social and economic framework, primarily based on the tax books of 1720 and 1789. These records not only show numbers, but also reveal how widows were supported financially or could support themselves, and whether they owned real estate. Chapter 3, "Widows as Citizens," defines the position of widows vis-à-vis citizenship, guilds, inheritance, guardianship, and charity. The author demonstrates that long-standing customs about inheritance and the like became law. Special attention is paid to a widow's (temporary) rights regarding the inheritance of the business of

her late husband. After these public and legal aspects, the fourth chapter is concerned with "The Widow in the Family," and deals with this theme as it is recorded in the marriage contracts. These contracts multiplied rapidly from 1760 on, and reveal the practice of intra-family division of property, which favored and fortified the legal status of widows. Chapter 5 provides a summary entitled "Widows in Ravensburg: The Participant." Here, the author uses available public documents to present the recorded opinion about widows. Gradually, the concept of "widow" took on its own definition as an analog to the traditional concept of the familial "husband" in the social discourse about gender, occupation, and property and, as the author posits, found its own niche in a society in which increasingly there were two spheres, divided by gender.

The author has used her sources well, both to reveal the data they contain as well as the opinions these data convey, and which guided the data-gathering in the first place. In its use of sources, the book makes a valuable addition to the study of widows and gender.

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